University of Alberta

Dying Scarlet

by

Timothy Jon Bowling

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

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Jim Bowling

407-9925 91 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
T6E 2T7

April 29th, 1997

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Dying Scarlet submitted by Timothy Jon Bowling in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Dr. Bert Almon, Supervisor

Dr. Ian MacLaren

Dr. John Oster

April 24th, 1997

Abstract

Dying Scarlet is a collection of lyric and narrative poems that attempts to record private emotion through the use of Canadian history and culture, as well as through more general subjects; its author hopes to live up to the definition of the poet as given by a friend of Thomas Hardy: "someone who touches the hearts of others by showing his own."

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Introduction

A poet giving a critical explanation of his own poems is akin to a heart surgeon, under anaesthetic, giving himself a coronary bypass: both can flail around with some semblance of expertise, but are likely to do irreparable damage to the patient.

However, at the risk of toe-tagging my thesis in the literary morgue, I offer a few general comments about the following poems.

Two distinct and seemingly contradictory impulses inform them: the communal desire to connect with a particular place and time (shown in "The Early Seventies," "National Unity," etc) through culture and history, and the perhaps stronger metaphysical desire (shown in "Final Night at Fort Chipewyan," "Autumn," etc) to dissolve all geographical and temporal loyalties.

With regards to these impulses, I position myself somewhere between Ralph Gustafson's notion of "witness poetry" (where "the poet falls upon the thorns of life, but it is not for himself he bleeds" [42]), and Robert Pinsky's realization that "the poet's first social responsibility [is] to continue the art" (98). This positioning amounts to the basic and ultimately unanswerable question: what purpose does poetry serve in our lives? For me, the answer will always remain lost because I find little distinction between the social and metaphysical impulses. Indeed, they often exist equally within the same poem. "Nocturne," "Response to a Dead Chief," "Dying Scarlet," and others, share a longing for place with a sense that no place can entirely contain or define us.

But this is merely reaching for the scalpel.

Besides, poetry is the most natural impulse. Let me make a comparison.

As a child growing up on the west coast, I spent much of my time staring into water (rivers, sloughs, ditches, wells, puddles), and the world stared back, all of it, stars and moon, sun and cloud, trees, birds, my own face, and yet there was always the thrill of something beyond the reflected world, deeper than the world, deeper than my own limited self, and this indefinable something gave childhood its edge, its peculiar flavour of longing and hope.

As an adult, I stare with the same natural intensity into language to recover that sense of a self floating between states, out of all knowledge and consciousness, because the world is in language, recordable, stars and moon, sun and cloud, trees, birds, my life, but there is something else in language as well, hidden in its depths, always just out of reach: if I could plunge my hand further in, if I could see a little deeper, I'd get it, that indefinable, mysterious force; and the longing that a child has instinctively for the future, a poet must have instinctively for his language (which is at once unique to him and drawn from a

common source), an insatiable desire for what must always escape him, certainty, about anything, the world, himself, but, most especially, about his art, which is strange, elusive, and miraculous.

SECTION ONE

In the first autumn frost of 1963, my brothers
coasted their punt to stillness in some marsh reeds
at the mouth of the Fraser River, and shot a pair
of rainbows from the sky. The mantelpiece of my parents'
home would display those stuffed greens and blues for years;
I'd later steal the glassy eyes to replace my aggies
lost at school. But that cold morning, I wasn't around,
when those quick mallards fell, when my brothers woke
in the same sparse room and spoke together almost
gently of the coming kill. I wasn't born. No myth
but theirs will line this poem, and no deaths either:
they're so young they can't foresee the rift
that time will tear between them. Maybe I know
where they were the night the two most famous shots
of the year brought down an empire's arcing prince,
but they don't know. Last month? Last week? Maybe
they were shooting pool at Dutchie's parlour or drinking
beer in the parking lot outside the rink. Maybe they
had bagged a ring-necked beauty in the pumpkin fields
behind some barn, or hung a spring-net at the cannery.
Hell, maybe they pressed their mouths against our mother's
swollen belly and told me secrets no one else could tell.
They don't remember anything about those days, and if
you can't remember how you loved your brother in the breaking
dawn, why would you care about the famous dead, or the fact
they died at all? My brothers were close as those two birds
that flew above the marsh; they're not close now. Myth-making
isn't in their blood, or mine, and it's not my business
to wonder where they stood the moment that their friendship
died.
Maybe they whispered something to me. Maybe they said, "Little
brother, you'll only know us when we're changed. But we were
once
another way." Maybe they just laughed and said "he packs a
punch."
I don't know. I might as well still be sleeping in the womb
with rainbow bruises on my temples, while my brothers pass
their frozen blue into my nephews' eyes.

The cock-pheasant and the fallen apple
(a transparent) share the top step
of the grey paint-chipped back-porch.
Both have been cut from their sap,
the bird from sky and cattailed ditch,
the fruit from its high branch.
On the laundry-line a bedsheet flaps
a rhythm quiet as a dying rain.
Against the side of the house
my brothers' mud-splotched boots
beside their shotguns catch
the final auburn of the sun.
There's a smatter of blood
along the snapped-tight beak
of the pheasant that's redder
than its red-brown feathers,
and a small bruise on the apple
where it struck the earth,
so that the former resembles
the moon with a single crater.
I am five and sitting on the bottom
of the porch. No one is looking for me.
It is the twilight time between supper
and my lukewarm bath. I know a few things
more than the things my eyes can see.
My brothers shot the cock with a gun
earlier that day in the potato fields.
It will decay as the transparent ripens,
one fall leeching the sap from the other.
And it will take a long time and no one
will even notice their traded skins.
And because I'm five and know some things
(and feel what I can't give a name to)
I have already sided with the apple.
I love how strange our changing happens.

She was the last labrador of our childhood, and when
the grizzle finally frosted her black dance through
the world, she crawled one humid August afternoon
to the cropped grass under the pear tree and breathed
in rhythm to the buzz of the wasps and hornets
as active in the rotted, broken fruit as slaves over
blocks for the pyramids, until her shadow and herself
became butterflies mounted to the memory of earth.

We shared the gravedigging with the sun; it buried
her shadow, we buried her. Dad peered down the coal-shaft
of her body, sighing "poor old girl", while Mom waved
the flies away with a dishtowel. I heard strange voices
echo in the ground; they said "join us, it is warm here",
and then the hornets' rasp of stone entombed all sound.
My sister wept seeds into the breathless soil.

The hole we dug was black as her. It was like we joined
her body to her shadow. Mom said "she was an old dog,
she had a long life." So the bones of Beauty
splattered like white rain from my father's hands
and the wasps dragged the red barge of her heart
under the deeper Nile.

I was young. I didn't know the sun would burn
my sister's tears; I thought they would grow
like the stars at twilight. But they burned. And mine.
The voices cried "plant more!", and how were we
to understand the words were human?

That was years ago. But still
I remember thinking
if Beauty's dead and buried in the ground,
oh sweet summer,
what's that lovely panting in my shadow?

Alone with my punishment, the half-brushed
blackboard's dizzying height made me swoon
on the classroom ladder's upper step: I paused,
chamois to my heart like the handkerchief
of a rich boy dead in the last century, dust
and the same cold letters to forget,
our common heraldry. Outside,
the winter night had tarred the motionless
swings, transformed the teeter-totters
into obsidian slabs, one end of each
pointed heavenward, like tombs.

All my friends had gone, my first friends;
the emptiness of their desks chilled me:
trembling, I descended the ladder.
In one corner of the room sat a large
mahogany globe; in another, a tank
full of crayfish glowing
a queer green light: its small, dun captives
scraped the glass sides continually,
waving at me in slow motion, then
settling to the bottom like leaves.
A week before, our janitor, Mr. Coombs,
had caught one in the hallway after midnight,
trailing a line of dirty water.
"They can smell the sea," he said.
"The salt in the air."
I approached the globe, too scared to touch
its smooth dark surface, thinking vaguely
"I am somewhere here." Beneath my hovering hand,
myself frozen, my hand lifted,
the half-brushed blackboard, the empty chairs,
the darkness thick beyond the window,
thinking, suddenly weightless,
"I am...here?"

All my friends had gone, the soft scraping
the only other presence in the room;
I could hear it repeated, the same insistent scrabble
coming from the globe, louder and louder,
coming from my body

And then I was in the playground, gasping,
the cold air in my lungs like ballast,
the spastic chamois stilled again at my side.
The stars were out, tiny and distant.
I stood wrapped in a nimbus of chalk-dust,
blinking at them: the huge tilted blackboard
of indecipherable figures extended forever,
untaught, unbrushed, unreachable;

but I did not swoon.
Somewhere above,
the maple leaf on its tall metal pole
gave a few weak flaps
like a bird in an oil-slick
struggling to fly,
then stopped.
My breath came easier, mingled
with the dust in a shower of perfect white;
behind me, the scraping of the globe
had faded; I could no longer hear it.

I stepped back
and the charged atoms of my paler self
hung briefly on the air
then drifted a short distance into darkness
and dissolved, their beautiful, frightening
language scarcely spoken, muffled by blood,
lost in the long salt-years of searching to come.

The first time I tasted liquor
followed fast on my first taste
of a girl's soft mouth. Whether
hours, weeks or months, I can't
now recall, but fast in memory
is all I know. The drink was vodka,
and the girl Jacqueline; we tipped
a swallow straight from the bottle
found at the back of her working
mother's fridge. I felt a burn
of turpentine and longed to cleanse
it with her pouting lips, still sweet
with the favoured sugar of our years,
but even then I must have sensed
she did not feel the same; her eyes
looked past me when we kissed.
My breathing would have roused
the sparks in any smoulder;
hers would not have doused
a birthday-candle's flame.
We capped the bottle, put it back,
and walked outside to August and
its quiet night. The stars were
drops of vodka that my body lapped
until it burned. I didn't understand
how much the bitter taste I carried
in my throat could be a sorry comfort
for the end of adult dreams; at ten,
I had the loneliness of flesh to learn.
Hours, weeks, or months, it wouldn't matter
if I could recall: that chubby boy crying
in the dark outside his parents' bungalow
wipes the taste of promise from his lips:
the hard stuff has just begun for him;
he'll carry the clear drops of that hour
into his next kiss when it comes,
gasoline for the fire at the back of his tongue.

Pane #1

I learned to skate in a World War II airplane hangar on the outskirts of a salmon-killing town. Converted to a rink, the propellor blades gave way to shooshing steel, dogfights to dainty arabesques. Who remembered Grable's ankles crossed or Miller's music going down in fog? Now teenaged lovers necked along the boards with no sense of irony to Engelbert Humperdink crooning "Please Release Me". That was the late sixties, that was peace, that was six years old. My dashing brother and his friends, freshly graduated, drank BC's own Ben's beer in stubby bottles with the bright tartan label and hung wicker potpourri and bunny ears from the rear-view mirrors of their first cars, the vroom of those built engines all the darkened runway knew of power then. My brother worked the ice. A red-jacketed rink rat, he swooped from crease to crease to tend the fallen and toss delinquents (no fights, no "crack-the-whip", no funny cigarettes). He could send a spray Niagara-high when stopping at top speed. Sometimes he had to dry a child's tears or bandage fingers cut by blades. Sometimes young girls faked falls to have his lashes fanning them. Saturday nights were fast and just got faster. The hit parade and hormones whirled the crowd between the boards. I was lost in all that blur, pushing a skinny iron cart, my ankles sliding on the ice. The music was so loud, the bodies hurtled by! When they held the Sadie Hawkins skate, my brother sat me in the penalty box and gave me chocolate bars. I watched a hundred tiny moons spin in the black rafters and spill over the ice. Elvis Presley sang or perhaps Tom Jones, the yearning voice reaching crescendo over the still heads of the unchosen lined along the boards. Couples holding hands passed between the moons in silent, slow formations. I almost always fell asleep. And when I woke, I saw the thousand stars of winter shining through the backseat skylight of my brother's mustang fastback as he drove me home. They did not move. We sped along the Fraser's banks in nearly total darkness, curving, racing my brother's pulse-rate into town. And the stars did not move. I lay on my back, half-asleep, peering through the thin glass. Sometimes I reached out to touch it, as though I could smear those still lights, my small hand, blood-fuelled, revving in the flak.

Pane #2

We had no spotlight on our cannery rental boat. Late August, the tide rushing out, and a chill in the thickening fog. We had drifted so far downriver, we had lost the channel home. I knelt in the bow to watch for driftwood and deadheads, to

shout at each black shape. We idled slowly, our stern low with salmon, our engine barely audible above the current. My brother leaned his head outside the cabin window, straining, shouting "can you see the bank?" We had been awake all day and night. What we saw, we saw a second later. Cold tears ran from my eyes. I blinked, then blinked again. "I think there's something..." but my brother didn't hear, another second passed. There'd been nothing there. Once, I thought I heard him yell and turned to look. He'd pulled his head inside. I could just see his face through the fog and glass. A pale blur. A ghost behind the wheel. I turned back to the eastern sky. Every now and then, a star fell from a wisp of fog, like an ear-ring appearing above a scarf, like an ear-ring lying on the ice. Once my brother would have picked it up. Once I would have held it in my wonder. Now I gripped the anchor-cleat so tight the dried fish-blood cracked along my skin. Black ice of sky, black river. We crept towards the towhead and the hidden lights of town, two hung moons frozen on the running water.

Pane #3

Crossing Burrard Inlet in the rain with a female friend who is not a lover. How sad and beautiful the lights of the city are, neon streaks of red and green dripping down the windshield of the harbour ferry. It's nearly midnight on my wrist but always two a.m. Where are we going? Why can't we hear the engine that takes us to the other side? There are two dozen people here but no one is speaking. They all stare through the giant glass. My pretty friend looks like she would have been a girl to fake a fall on ice. A girl who would have waited for her song to choose a blood-warmed hand. Not one of mine. Mine have become the cold stars of my reaching and my fear. They do not move. I wish on them for all downed pilots, aging brothers, distant years. Now the only moon hangs swollen over the towns where we lived. How long can its clear glass hold? Red star, green star, the past that's flowing. We skate for all familiar light, innocent of the breakage in our stride, but of the breakage, knowing.

Golfing at Beach Grove

for Curt Stadel

Just dawn. Ocean mist over the fairways,
and the sun somewhere behind it
like an eagle's heart, calm
but destined for a racing warmth
when the white burns off. We're smooth-
skinned at twelve and playing through
a foursome of old men we can barely see,
their voices rough and low as the grind
of tide on rock: "sure, boys, go ahead."
And we stride past their blurred forms,
haying the yardage with our long irons,
sowing dew into the path ahead of us,
the green earth so wet we might be
sinking slowly into the advancing sea.
It's April. The rhododendron-tips
split open to the heaviness of colour
and the tall cedars sport corsages
of birdsong on their starched lapels.
We speak of lowest rounds and one-
putts and straight approaches with
soft landings, when we speak at all.
Mostly, we walk apart, keep a silence
whose substance now is as lost to me
as the mists and voices over that course
we played a hundred times before we turned
thirteen. Whatever we thought of, whatever
we said only to ourselves, or didn't say,
how the smell of the earth or the nearby sea
moved from our senses to our dreams, or
stopped somewhere along the way, is gone.
We sank or yipped the putts, we marked
the scorecards, and we broke the mist
with swings until we felt the talons
of a later hour at our skin.

My last time home, I drove out to the course
at night, along the ocean till I reached
the fairway of the par-four tenth
you once eagled from two-hundred yards.
I sent my headlights' arcing shots
between the cedars at the green
and in the silence strained to hear
them drop. I thought I could smell
the rhododendrons though their season
had not come; it was only my hand
on the wheel that showed the years
we'd lived and hadn't kept in touch.
I thought, how strange we are to sow a dew
into a path we'll always want to reap

though the picking proves more difficult
and tartness shares the flavour of the fruit.
I sat there for a while, the eighteen dark
pockets empty of all hands and waiting for other
boys to reach down until they find the moment
when they become the blurred pauses of old men.
So close to the sea and its familiar sounds,
even this landscaped earth could not deny its needs,
eighteen pried oyster-shells longing for their loss,
a round white jewel to complete their purpose,
but now only winter moonlight and a light frost
rolled towards the cups. I stepped out of the car
and walked in the sure trajectory of its beams
and tried to breathe an April from the air,
asking, what do our hearts hide from in youth,
what consumed our approaches when we were last there?
And the question went straight out in search of a sun
that hasn't burned through to us yet, but will,
flies out from our longing in search of a purpose,
and will find one, in this endless reaching for blossom,
along this green path that we'll always walk blind,
until the earth will have the very pearls of us.

The men of my family never spend their change.
Weighted pockets, jingling postures, the fear
of public counting; these are my small legacy.
I'd sooner break a paper Queen than dole her out
in petty coin. The largesse of pride and insecurity;
bills from thin billfolds, a show for every waitress.
The world scorns a round man, and defines him by his edges.
My father's bedside table groans beneath its salver;
the bluenose and the beaver clink on that strange water.
"In wartime," my mother says, "he'd have drowned on leave
in a Yonge Street puddle before he'd empty his pockets.
A nice fate for a handsome sailor. That's your dad,
just like your brother, last of the big-time spenders."
I shared a room with my older brother and his mint,
our hardwood floor so iced with dimes I thought
the moonlight through our window froze in circles.
He'd come in at two a.m. and crash his pants
between our beds; that struck gong soundtracked
my dreams. But money's never been a family friend.
I have a little now, a pretty-sided salmon for
my mother's rainy day, a jingle for my nervous
hands, and a folded pretense for a pretty face.
But it won't stay. Already the coins have spilled
onto the table beside my bed, and across the floor:
I stand in the moonlight shedding nickels and dimes,
another tree in the unblossoming orchard of my line.

Where I grew up
seventeen chandeliers of dark blood swung from
in the sweetest piracy. Seventeen low clouds
threatening a heavy rain that always fell
but gently. Seventeen years. All we're given
of acceptable blindness. I counted them
again today, those trees. Seventeen,
I'm sure of it.

Seventeen ripe cherry trees,
the cheeks of the sky, blushing.

Whale jaw, jack-spring spine, rock cod gill,
scallop under the skin of my hand; these
are the bones I'm burying now. Tomcat skull,
sparrow wing, spaniel paw, full moon behind
my bluest gaze; I'm planting them all.
No animal returns to gnaw its gnawed limb
left in a trap; I've thirty years to dig
the deep six for, and hard shoulderblades
to gunnysack. Darling, carry the spade
for me, chant my years without you down;
I want the sunlight on a new foundation,
my old bricks in the wormsweet ground.
Cattle hock, heron claw, muskrat rib,
mast I hang my breathing from; I'll part
the grass and roll the die; I'll build
new castanets: here's a fresh gentility:
as the hummingbird twines its tiny nest
of spiderweb and moss, so I build
my hope and sleep from the marrow
of your kiss.

For three nights, snow. The gentle steps
of your days disappear, but your body,
at least, is safe, sleeping now beside
me while the city snow-ploughs
push your lovely journeys to the
curb. I cannot close my eyes
for fear your body is the fallen snow
and nothing in my touch or voice
can keep the night from filling in
the journeys you have granted
to my life. I lie awake and
listen to the awful grind of
scything in the pure fields
of the earth, and cannot bring myself
to understand the snowfall also
means the losing of my heavier path,
the many steps I took unconscious
of your presence in the world,
but then, in the middle of some
placid dream, you run your hand
across my chest, so lightly
I cannot even feel the dark,
red drifts you've pushed beyond
my breathing so I can know
the promise of undreamed avenues,
tomorrow filling in
one flake at a time.

Edmonton/1994

A new city, a new river,
but the blood in the world
is the same. Bruce, this
beautiful terror made me
dream your pure young coast,
the wheelwatch down from Rupert
and the waking shock that killer
gave your nodding bones.

Yesterday, in the valley trails
of the North Saskatchewan, I half-
dozed at a picnic table, head hung
over a book, the shouts of playing
children droning me to sleep.
What made me look? Some pulled
trigger in my blood perhaps? Our
father's eyes we share? I looked,
and the big buck tore across my sight
so fast he hoofed a red print in my chest.
Muscles straining, eyes crazed, he bounded
left, then right, then crashed again into
the trees. My heart kicked twice, as though
to help him run. What breath I had could not
slow down; it beat the air like hooves.

And then I thought of you, half-asleep
at twenty-one, wheelwatch for a seiner
running fast at night. Dozing, dozing,
when the killer clapped its black wave
at the bow. Beautiful terror! You felt
you'd lost your pupils to the sky.
Your blood spun like rope uncoiling.
Your eyes could not stretch wider.

Brother, we are bound by more than memory;
something gifts us this mad joy.
Never mind the city or the river:
family is any star we choose; we
don't steer our lives by chance,
we steer by who we are and what we share.

After Receiving a Letter from my Aged Parents

Four kinds of wood in the cross that held Christ
four directions we can take to make absence
one naked pain in the eastern sky
one sad god for the race

I've named him Loss
and I'll pray to him until the snow
fills my shadow with mated swans
until there's a forever in every shape
the light carves from my body
I've named him Loss
and I'll kneel before him, singing,
until time stills the slow wings
of my moving voice, releases
the ache from the flock

Sweet Loss, our father, I see you hanging
on the blackest rood of all four winds
your flesh torn and your eyes open.
There's no wood to soak your blood.
No one cares enough to mount your pain.
But I'm here, sweet Loss. One man,
one faith, one song. I'm here.
And the tears of your world burst my palms.

Snowmuffled churchbells wake me in the pre-dawn dark.
I have never heard them before, my whole life sleeping.
Why should I hear them now, low leaven for another day
just like my thirty years of days? Theirs is not the tolling
I was born to know, under fog and over tide, the calling
of the salmon home. Theirs is not a summons rung by rain.
But something in each muted sound, the distances between,
is ancient, how the heart must hear the human voice,
its bass-line prayer for time, more time.

Strange, to stir before the faithful of a city, half-
asleep and breathing to a half-familiar, distant knell.
Slowly, as the dawnlight gutters in, so frail a whisper
could well snuff the future out, I see the rotted whale
again, its mass of black scarred white from scraping stone.
A baby nar, some adult says, closing his cryptic lips
around a steaming mug beside the salted driftwood fire.
I stand within the circle of the light and stare.
The ocean falls, and pauses, and falls. A wordless speech.
I know the belly of the whale burns red as flame and
that a sinner sleeps within. Will he walk out and join
our bodies gathered on the beach? Or will he choose
another living in the fire? I watch until the surf
and lateness draw my senses in.

How long it takes our lives to step into their changes.
I'm waking now to muffled heartbeats dying in a body far at
sea,
a body rolling like a black pew torn from an island church.
Faith is the belly and fire that keeps us, the silence
between each breath and word, and how we know to live there.
When I rise and look out the window on the reddening city
not my own, the bells will toll softer through the heavy snow.
I won't go with them where they're leading. Circle and creek
becoming one. The sweet salt, memory, calls me home.

SECTION TWO

I

I own title to the tall grass still, possession
of the earth by childhood, while the slow herd
of late summer suns disappears bloodshot back
from the rifle-barrel of the Fraser's mouth down
to the mock-prairie, wheat-freightered ocean.
Tanned from my white origin, shirtless, barefoot,
I walk in the dream-state of my years, out
of Bernie's Confectionery, with my bag of jujubes
and nigger-babies, and two packs of hockey cards,
with crystalled lips and tongue, and a mind turned
just slightly to winter's call of bladed glory,
off the gravel-cobbled streets to the vacant lot,
a body about to find the marrow for its bones,
paste to hold the heartbeat to particular earth.
At school, they have begun the rote of answers
designed to cast me in the mould of citizen,
but here, a child must learn early and alone
to find his real map, set his own questions.
I stepped into the grass.

Black candy sweet in my mouth, the nigger young
I'd never seen, but took the word as birthright
along with television tales of Daniel Boone,
I paused, and ripped a pack. The prize that fall
was Orr spreadeagled in the air, mouth agape,
tripped by Noel Picard, while the heroic Hall
clutched vainly at the shot that won the Bruins
the Cup. I had spent a dozen dimes to hold
that tiny photograph. Rumours swirled at school:
"Did you hear, Miss Robinson once dated him?"
Pretty enough, her long red hair up in a bun,
and short skirts showing off her legs; no one
dared to ask, but preferred instead just to believe.
When she had us repeat "pomme-de-terre" for a simple spud,
we were so awestruck by the thought of Bobby kissing her,
we didn't even think to laugh. Foiled again, I pocketed
the cards and ripped the second pack.

THE BATTLE OF DUCK LAKE. And something about Riel,
Dumont, Macdonald and the Metis printed on the back.
And on the front, in place of bluelined ice,
several Mounties flandered on the snow, the dead
of our own war, ambushed by a rebel force. March
of 1885. Somewhere on the prairies where
my father went on pheasant shoots, Octobers
when the sockeye-runs had dried. I stood and read
the card, then flipped the others in my hand:
Batoche, Craigellachie, the Plains of Abraham.

But the bloodied snow was burning in my palm.
A garter snake shivered a quick pulse at my feet.
I looked down, but it was gone. The sun threw its
long red coat over the still-warm ground. I walked
through the tall grass home.

That night, (or was it now another fall?)
the Russians put their sickle to our stalk.
Our tv screen was pocket-sized, and black on white.
Kharlamov had our rearguard in a spin; he ragged
the puck and dipsey-doodled. His comrades shared
his verve and peppered Dryden in our net. My brother
screamed, a stubby bottle for his crucifix, "In the name
of the God who created us, answer their fire!"
And my father grinned. "Agh, we're too slow, look
at that, you'd think we never played the game."
Enraged, my brother challenged him: "Five bucks!
Five bucks we win the series!" And he put the bill
into my hand. "A fool and his money," my father said,
giving me his bet, and winking, "keep it somewhere safe.
That'll buy a lot of vodkas at the Legion."

Orr wasn't playing, so I left the living-room.
I'd never held a five before; the white-haired man
was Wilfrid Laurier, who drank and sent the troops
to crush the Metis in our west, which was my east,
because he ran the country. Or wasn't it another man?
My mother answered me while cooking in the kitchen.
"No, John A. Macdonald drank. He was a Scotsman, our
first prime minister. Pierre Trudeau's the fellow
who's in charge now. He's from Quebec, too, just
like Laurier. I'm not sure about any rebellion.
Why don't you ask your new teacher, Miss....Robinson."

Was it then the fragrant rose in the lapel became
a gash in a breathless body in a trunk, and the troops
arrived en masse, and les Habitants reclaimed the Cup
before the Broad Street Bullies bloodied a thousand noses
on the ice, a thousand spots where seal-pups surfaced,
red stones curled to the button, in perfect draw-weight,
and on tv, once, instead of Disney's Boone and Crockett,
Cornelius Van Horne and coolies dead in the Rocky passes?
I recall, to hit a homerun at our softball diamond meant
the ball had to reach the war memorial, and the names
of all the Salish sons in Flemish graves I memorized
are lost with the centre who fed Richard and the corpse
that tumbled from the trunk and who won the Brier the year
my brothers were old enough to join the autumn Taber hunt.
My body browned and paled, became a penny from a nickel
every summer, and a nickel from a penny by late fall.
I walked by the Fraser and aged. I rang the till.

II

Now over twenty years have gone since Hewitt quavered
out of Moscow "Henderson has scored for Canada!"
and my sock-drawer gave up its crisp blue leaves
like the maple tree beside our porch. Bobby Orr
is Robert now and promotes a company's products
for a price; Miss Robinson, whom he might have
kissed, is somewhere, please, happy in her life,
and Macdonald's still the drunken Scot who noosed
Riel to fame while Laurier pleaded leniency.
Sir Wilfrid, this is the end of our century.
If I dream of openness for my kind to roam,
am I chasing a dying herd, and fighting history?
The first train shushed to the frontier, black
on the white snow, like a referee, come to mop
up blood; Riel swung with defiance on his lips,
and Dumont scattered like the buffalo he used to hunt:
At Duck Lake, the prophet waved his cross, exhorting
"Answer their fire!" and the answer came,
and came to failure. And we only have the echo
of possibility, the dream of a different future,
shivering the blades in quiet moments under
a descending and endangered sun.

I

I'm in a Vimy foxhole with my grandfather who's bleeding to death, the blood rising to his boottops, the shrapnel in his back. The battle going on above us sounds like the adult voices children hear but don't understand as they listen from their beds. This is the first time we have met. His eyes are my blue but they are a body of water in which many have already drowned. He is scared and his breath is short. He says, "I can smell honey. I can see the swarms." And I know he's remembering his youth, a strong boy pedalling jars of gold through Edmonton's streets. And the hives kept all winter in the basement of the family home. That calm buzzing below that now hovers angrily over us. "I shouldn't have been afraid," he said. "Fear stirs them up. If I had just relaxed, I would have been all right." He looks at me for confirmation, and I nod. The blood slops in the pails at his feet. What can I say to him for comfort? I'll tell him how beautiful summer still is in the valley of the North Saskatchewan. And I'll try to put apple blossoms in my words, and the whirring of bicycle spokes, and the clack of a pool-break. I'll hold his hand until the soldier comes who dragged his life up and out and over the mud and saved it. And saved my father for his birth, and me for mine. Grandfather, father, and son. I'll write my own history for all the grandsons on their haunches in the stench and blood. Rise up. A thousand Vimys mean nothing to a single absent love.

II

They've strapped him to a bed in the same hospital I'd be born in five years later. He's been fighting his own death for days, and his arms are bruised blue with the effort. I've brought him honey but he says it tastes like blood, warm and thick. His son and pregnant daughter-in-law are driving to Vancouver. She had said to him, "And soon you'll meet your new granddaughter," to which he replied, "Jeannie, this time I'm not coming out." And he's right, and we both know it, and there's no sound above or below us. I tell him I've been walking the streets of Edmonton smearing the blue of his gaze over the air. He smiles, and coughs, and tries to hold out his lashed-down hand. A single tear falls from each of our eyes. "That's nice," he says, "I'm sorry to be dying. Tell your father not to grieve too long, and to look after his mother. And his new daughter." And then he pauses. "And you. I'm sorry, I don't know your name." I tell him, and he thanks me for the blossoms in France when his blood rose like the Fraser tide. Then his eyes close. And then my grandfather dies.

for my grandmother, Margaret Stevens (1885-1945) and her children, the four living and the fourteen dead

My totem is black as the rains of Haida Gwai; black
is my totem with tears of generations, a burnt block
of cedar sinewed with Latinate phrases and names
of dead infants tallied each year to poverty's pox
and polio; my totem is black and keeps a Christ
in its grain, His words, His blood, and His high cross;
black is my totem and the eyes that raised it, from
bedside tables to parlours of grief; my totem is black
and lurid with the ink of an illiterate hand, mother
to Toronto's graves, daughter to a dashed Irish dream;
black is my totem as the winter rains of Haida Gwai.

Let the spiders nest in the rot of its wood, in
the soft pit of faith that sways in the wind,
under the garish streak of the mask of pain,
under the slash of light, that naked bulb
above the childbirth-bed, cast on the three
sets of twins uncried at the slap, cast on
the multiple coughs in the crib, cast on
the woman whose body is rain, and rains
through her days, her months, and her years.
Let the crows light and caw, let them sound
out the storms of the steaming kettles
that filled her kitchen as she inked the pages
and hummed the hymns, let their black wings
wreath the rented door while the undertaker
takes her teenaged girl unprettied to her
piece of earth. Let my totem eat the storm,
black into the burnt block, rain into char;
let it suffer the names of the little children
in a night without stars, as she did, turning
tear-streaked again to her husband's warmth.

Then let the sun break red over Haida Gwai.

Response to a Dead Chief ...27

To us the ashes of our ancestors are sacred
and their resting place is hallowed ground.
You wander far from the graves of your ancestors
and seemingly without regret.

Chief Seattle, 1854

Somewhere in southern Ontario, perhaps
behind a small brick church with a dying congregation
and a collection plate scattered with nickels
still graced with the head of Edward VII,
the tombs of my maternal grandparents,
thick and unread as Latin bibles, gather snow.
No one brushes the winter from their names.
There they lie, Maggie and Arthur, dead
these fifty years.

And high on a bluff above the Pacific,
in the Salish-called town of Tsawwassen,
my unnamed brother keeps his crib
in the perfect silence of his birth.
That sound in the pines is not his cry,
but only my parents' lost weeping.
Such a sweet place to be anonymous.
Every shadow that crosses the earth
unaware of his bones
carries the perfume of cedar.

Now,
the black petals
of another cold night
descend from the stars,
the only custom offered to my family's rest.
And they are tired of waiting for us.

Seattle, I confess,
the small tombs in my fingernails
are rarely visited by my eyes, and what the geese
pencil with their wings on autumn moons
falls smeared in random letters of the rain.
Seattle, I'm like anyone, more than 2000 miles
and a beautiful bluff from loving the earth:
finding our dead is the first stroke home
(whether Shield or Prairie or Salted Coast);
the body is a paddle we grip with our bones.

Up from Bedford Basin in the rain, from
the slick pewter of the minesweeper's deck
to the lowering skies on the Dartmouth side,
his wireless headset with its squawk
of horrors left behind
and the bunks and Betty Grable pinups
and the sonar pings that break the long
Atlantic silences, my father climbs past
tombstones to his waiting bride. Her still-
warm wedding gown now bunched lace in
her mother's cedar chest on Grove and Dundas,
she watches through the rooming-house window
his young body fully clad in sailor-white
wend its way through the dead of two cities.
The hill is steep, muddy, and his approach
through the tombs seems hesitant, as though
he is a pawn guided past threatening rooks
by an inexperienced player, or a gull
caught in the shoals of a low tide.
They are so new to each other, and young
in the way that feeds and forestalls war,
my father's body as ripe for death as love,
my mother's warmth a precious lull
in the splash of the depth-charges
and their awful echo over the sea.
Do they even care their roles are reversed,
that so recently he waited in a draughty church
for her brilliant white appearance in the midst
of her drab-suited father and brothers?
That she seemed hesitant amongst their grey
and nearly incidental figures, and took
a long time to flounce the aisle with her train?
The proper Toronto altar and this inexpensive room
let by a Scottish woman older than their mothers
are as one. The world is at war, death is what
they have to touch to find their way to life,
and it doesn't matter who's in white and seeks
the other out. They're human, their flesh
ignores the granite memory pleading from the grave.
And I'm their child, in love in peacetime,
and my love is just the same.

In the city of my mother's birth
moonlight drips from the bony flanks
of the rag-and-bone man's sorry nag.
A little girl in threadbare clothes
with eyes in her face large as
the holes in her stockings stands
shivering in the pale sheen. If
she had an apple, she would raise
it like a flame to watch the sinewed
darkness snuff it out;
if she could turn herself to grass,
she'd lie before the chipped hooves
and wait to disappear.

In the city of my father's birth
moonlight topples in Doric columns
from the starless sky, while a cold
wind paws the rack of used coats
stretched along a breadline. Blocks
away, wandering the ruins, a young man
pauses at the hissing entrance of a
blacksmith's shop. Snowflakes sink
into his skin like fossils, each one
moving closer to the molten core. If
he owned a horse, he'd shoe it with
fire so it would never slow down;
if he could, he'd forge his own hands
to its hooves and clap vast meadows
out of every moment's lost desires.

In the city of my birth
moonlight tips soft and grey
off the wings of swooping gulls.
The vertebrae of a dinosaur hangs
from a black bow in the harbour.
I stand on the third floor of a
skyscraper's shadow, watching
seals crawl out of the Inlet
to die; they cover the bodies
of derelicts with a deeper darkness;
they leave salt-trails like a scatter
of panhandled coins. If I had my mother's
eyes, I would look only on grass until
her heart had meadowed and fragranced
the seas of her every breath; if I had
my father's skin, I would excavate
his past with the kisses of a woman
whose mouth settles softer than any
moonlight. But I can't give them
sweeter streets than what they knew,

nor clean mine of pain to ease
their worry. I have their blood
only. And blood, ask any traveller,
is the loneliest city.

Southern-born,
I had no vocabulary to go north, and no words
to get me there. Now I'm praying as we hold
desperately to the long white train of a wedding-
gown worn by a bride whose cold face is veiled
with confetti, and can't be seen. Chipewyan.
I whisper my new mantra as the logging-trucks
thunder past inches from our lane which is no lane,
on a road narrow as a flower's stem. We're driving
towards Alberta's oldest town (forgive me Fort
Vermillion), bordered by a frozen lake on one side
and herds of bison on the other. Why? None of us
is a nineteenth-century Englishman mad for routes
to Asian wealth; no Lord Franklin graces our party,
only students of exploration literature outfitted
with cameras, and sent forth by the university
to see and feel how space defines our heritage.
What space, I wonder, as the felled logs sway
into our lane again. Chipewyan, Chipewyan, Chipewyan.
O please, let me make it alive to the Trapline Pub
on its bluff above the town, where I can watch
the northern lights shine green against the cairn
that marks the first raised fort. Let me kiss
the bride whose face is turned away. All I want
now is her silence and her still beauty, and later,
if the north grants its cold language to my tongue,
I'll lecture on how the spaces between the spaces
are dazzling white metaphors for the wide space between
thinking that you are, and actually being, Canadian.

The woman pulling draft behind the bar
is Dogrib and pretty. If I imagine her
dark length curved against my pallor,
it is my literal reading of her tribal
name that trips my fancy, not desire
to know and be known through the body.
Yet this far north, the flesh is all,
often the only light, the only fire:
where the nights are coldest, there
is need to rise above the fact of bone;
as much as love, sex is metaphysical.
Franklin would have sent Back home
to keep him from love, if possible.
Instead, he sent him shoeing south
to burn out the fires in his flesh.
Abstinence synonomous with survival
is not the invention of our age.
And with Back gone, Hood was left
to plunge his pale body like a sword
into the living body of the north.
But I was born to fantasize in word
and not in touch. The clean, sharp
ribs of the dog that cage its heart
tremble from the howl that is hunger,
the howl that is pain. And such
is my human longing to touch her,
the woman pulling draft behind the bar,
not her body, not for passing pleasure,
but the naked resonance in her name,
the cold truth of it, its pale fire,
that says, again and again, as the year
tracks over the snow to a new century,
this is what it is to be human, here
or home, slowly-fading sunlight
around a standing bone.

Approaching a Herd of Bison by Snowmobile

Charred scraps, the still-sparked ashes
of last night's aurora, sifted down
to rest in the corner of a snowy field.
Midday. We speed towards them
like filings to their black magnetics.
Their fire is all but out in the land.
Like us, they mass to keep the absence warm.
Once, they foreshadowed every prairie night
and storm, their full eclipse running
out of the sun, their shagged bulk torn
from the space between the stars. Then,
they were the grave-soil of themselves
ploughed back, living pits of fur and bone
that moved across the grasses till the earth
was full. Now there is no separation
between the shadow and the flesh of them.
We can't even hear their rumbling over
the pace of our approach. Burnt petals
on a long white stalk, they know no
spring or final chill; they just hold
to life, to the land, to the sun and air,
and out of the northern lights, the tinsel
gift, they float down to smudge the pretty
white throats of our amnesiac nature.

What his body casts is not a shadow,
but the fine, thick pelt of his past
stretched out on a glitter of snow.
How it must feel to have the sun
stroke and assess the very memory
of your life. In his willow-nested
cabin along the Embarrass River,
crooked, small, and disarrayed
as an explorer's chart-mad wheelhouse
from another century, his voice plays
the faint music of his french blood.
"Dey don't pay so good for rats now."
And it's as though we've stepped back,
briefly, into the history that is ours,
the steel-traps set and the money exchanged,
dark fur made manifest-and-silver on the coin,
the long portage to our pink reality on the class-
room walls of the world. But still he laughs,
holding out his trembling arthritic hand to say
he's not the man he was, though what he is
is more than all the sun can glean from any shadow,
a human wind over the land forming the conscious
centre of our country's silence, that warm locus
whispering presence in the night. And so we follow,
out of his cabin into the cold, blue day,
where the trees heap their plush furs to cover us.

Final Night in Fort Chipewyan ...35

On frozen Athabasca Lake
I stood alone, several hundred strides
from shore. February. Twilight. Somewhere
my name was written down in books, in files,
on old letters, called up on screens. Somewhere
a woman spoke my name to a friend, and smiled.
What happens when even the dogs fall silent
north of everything you've ever known?
Suddenly, it was as though the universe
had slipped beneath the ice, and my heart
sent a faint signal to my life on earth.
If someone had called my name just then,
I would not have turned. I was a new language
given substance by the kindness of the wind.
The moon rose slowly, detached from the snow.
I returned to my long sentence and my story,
found the low stars of the town, and headed in.

If there are angels here, we cannot see them.
If the stone-wings of someone's small eternity
strain for the prairies' shy starlight
- peeking like children from behind the dark skirts
of this brooding Manitoba storm -
they will reach whatever heaven they must reach
alone:
who cares for the dead, in the night, in the heat,
in a lonely coffee-shop
in the June-dry middle of a world
most hearts rise from like startled pheasants,
alive, alive, but craving the wet ditch
and the sweet-rank whisper of origin?

I am thirty-two hours by bus
from the flowing black hair of seine-boats
shimmering with the pink blossom of salmon
and from my own bark angel sinking
his soft wings in the silt.

Somehow, the word "distance" hangs
from the cracked lower lip of the elderly woman
who takes my few coins; I can't bear
the blue moonlight she carries in her eyes:
I know it must have been white before I came
I know the shadow on my spine
has rinsed it with tears.

"Do you remember a woman...?" I almost ask,
but who doesn't remember the tall blood
that presides over each lost cemetery,
the singing made stone
and risen?

Honourable speaker, you don't care why I've come here.
The shirtless teenagers tossing frisbees don't care;
the lawn is a green beach and draws the other sex.
The Japanese tourists posing beside the statue
of Lester B. Pearson just because it's there
don't see how my hands age to maple leaves
and how fast time drains them of blood.
I'm a hundred years younger than my country.
That's young, but still, we're both dying.
Honourable speaker, why pretend any longer?
The flesh of your kind seeps through the brick.
The living tongue in the gargoyle's mouth,
flapping and flapping. I'm tired of your wind
around the flag. What does it mean exactly,
"from far and wide?" We know the God who keeps
our land is the moneyed God our neighbours trust.
Honourable speaker, I'm confused: did 'Stompin'
Tom Thomson really drown by putting his foot through
a rowboat in the middle of an Ontario lake?
I don't care; I love his paintings and his songs.
He used to believe in this place and its people.
Remember, he sang the theme for "Marketplace."
Honourable speaker, do you note the irony?
Ah, what is a Canadian childhood worth?
I spent mine in the salt-spray and cedars,
and learned nothing of character-building winters.
And no one's ever called me a Pearson baby.
But I've come here, nevertheless. It's quiet,
and I can almost believe that somebody cares.
Look. A Japanese kid is choking poor Lester,
mugging for the folks back home. He could
be Lyndon Johnson, shutting up a pipsqueak.
Honourable speaker, do you even know what I mean?
The very words of this poem render me a fool
to all who sell the future and the past.
But to call love folly, with a falsely-glowing
heart, is the true measure of what's colonial.

There are some things that we were not meant
to know in the sense of attempting to know them
by the senses, but which could be known only
to Faith...Men may be guided by evil spirits or
by good spirits.

From the diaries of Mackenzie King

King in a seance reached my unborn soul
before the War. As a lark, I rapped back
"yes, Hitler will be murdered by a Pole."
Willing William thought I was his father.
He called on Sir Wilfrid, then his mother,
so anxious to confirm his nature's need
to stand at ease. But what King believed
in our capital's bureaucratic dark
about the fate of evil didn't light
the ashes in his heart; he cast
a crowded ship of jews back to the sea,
then won another term. This too is us:
somewhere just below the myth of decency,
Nelson Eddy crooning at Banff, our morals
lay sick in steerage, like refugees.

My flesh is 33 years old. King is dead
with Hitler and his mother in the other world.
No one keens by candlelight at Sussex now
to seek advice. All is clear, all is well.
The rhetoric of the "common man," professional.
But the unborn of our nation miss the call
of power. Odd though he was, the sideless
symbol of our past understood the battle
of the light and dark; in his bachelor, civil-
servant room, he prayed with harlots for their souls;
intense at bedside, his proper, Victorian vigils
kept his moral surface pure, while the retching
went on in the hold.

How much he's in us, beyond every border
of this earth and dreams, such longing
for the other realm, such a cold struggle
over his little, lace-shawled, tables.
He knew he walked the edges, fanning hell-fire.
He closed the lit port of himself to screaming.
Human for all that, he entered the darkness, trembling.
Who before the nation now invites King's quaking hour?

Poor ghost of all our power's sick pretense,
I see you standing in your statuary rubble,
waiting to rap back something that you learned

too late about the heart, too late, and at
your own, and our expense. But no one calls.
And you're so desperate for another term.

You say, I can recognize what's evil now,
why don't they ask? You lock your knuckles
and then unlock them. Another night drifts off
from Parliament, rudderless, towards the sea.
Poor ghost. You've become an SOS we never hear,
a fading signal, a faint cry. Ghost, you've become
our history.

Stop Stop Stop
Stop/Arret Stop/Arret Stop/Arret
Arret Arret Arret

O the curious imperative birdsong of my country.
O the clatter of carriage wheels over planks
in the Quebec of the eighteenth century.
O the stutter of an anglais moving east by train
for the first time, bred on the cornflake-box and
grade-school utterance - O sucre! O lait! O je m'appelle!
Do you remember where you were when Trudeau enacted
the War Measures Act? When the postboxes blew?
I was deep in Cartier, Upper and Lower, and "Mesdames
et Monsieurs, le premier etoile, Guy Lafleur."
But enough. Arret Arret Arret
The signs fall by in the small towns at twilight
as the last pitch is thrown to the plate
and someone pulls into the station for gas
and the supper dishes soak in the sink.
The head of the Queen fell off my currency
hours ago; she's having high tea in the Royal York
with Lucien Bouchard, and they're both laughing.
The night is black as the pupils of Emile Nelligan
after twenty years in the asylum, the night is wet
with the ink of Le Devoir articles and the British
North America Act and mothers writing to their sons
dead and gassed in the Belgian mud. But again. Stop.
I have no right to my love and my accent is poor.
The signs flash by. O how like heartbeats in the body
of a lover when he knows his heart has been lost.

The beautiful tongue and the terrible smoke,
the sweet phrases flung from the charblack throat.
Montreal, your Old World elegance carries the price
of Mann's Venice; I can feel desire in every pore
of every passerby and taste death in all smiles.
Montreal, your women have more grace than English ghosts;
they are husky whispers rising like steam off the old brick.
And the men are so stunned they can't give up the staring
of their fathers' generation. My tongue, my eyes: what
good are they here? I will mumble merci and cast glances
down at the expensive Italian shoes. I will smother
my harsh Germanic speech with bagels and cream-cheese.
Montreal, the Forum is gone and Roger Doucet is dead
with both of our anthems in his grave. Do you think
I'm at home in Westmount? The sun that cracked the back
of my father's neck as he rode the tractor over acres
is a burnished coin in my beggarly hands. I know
the shadow of Roy's pregnant woman climbing a steep hill
to a hospital and the sick gaze of her favourite child.
I know the dozen infant deaths my mother's mother bore
in the rental dives of Toronto before the Great War.
Montreal, you are the cafe of the country all lovers
run into breathless, and even your storms are espresso.
But you're a city like any other, with the poor on their knees
in the streets, with a lipsong of cancer masquerading
as style. And I'm at home in your cool facade,
looking past your beauty for the grief.

The night train from Montreal to Halifax
slowly caresses the long hip beaded
with a million droplets
of a woman fresh from her shower.
Like a boy ignorant of slow curves
and suddenly come to the knowledge
I stare and stare the whole length
of this languid recline
over which the train
slips like black silk.
My flag blushes to one colour
then pales to the other; I am
all fire and lick and burn,
and finally, blanch surrender.
The moon of me against the glass
going by so pale and secretly
trembling, an English officer
at the foot of high cliffs
turning his face to the sky.
I am both colours and changing,
a signal to the troops; red
if by land, white if by sea,
white if by land, red if by sea.
Now the city is gone, silk slipping.
Now the train is a last long swallow
of liquor in the throat of a man
as he dies. It's true: we can go weak
from loving ideas like the flesh.
But isn't weakness what our love is for?

On a Rainy Day in Halifax, Contemplating the Military Presence ...43

Whatever a man ought to be or do seems important here.
Three thousand American sailors slide on the slick
and tilting deck of this old port. Their ship is nuclear
and probably longer than the walk I'll take; it is
a South Asian night bobbing on the water into which
helicopters disappear; it is all the shadows ever cast
in the life of an African beaten to death. I am the only
man not in a group. Sex for me is not a guiding ardour.
Our first night in town, a friend advised, "steer clear
of the Citadel after dark; that's where the gays cruise
and sometimes get beaten to pulp by gay-bashers."
The ghosts of the 1917 Explosion still drip with tar.
I saw a film about the 2000 dead and all that horror.
Now sticks of white dynamite pack the still harbour.

The Queen of Esquimalt Enters Active Pass ...44

Nearly midnight on Galiano Island.
A light burns in the window of a cabin
swallowed by darkness; such a singular
warmth, like an oven-door thrown open.
Three people, old enough by only a few years
to appreciate silence, switch off the radio,
and listen. I am not yet part of a couple,
but even though my friends are married, tears
still drop singly into each of the shadows
we cast on the wooden floor. But what they carry
between their glances makes them double,
while my eyes beat their moth deaths against
the window-pane. Whatever it is that calls us
from our kind, despite love, comfort, joy,
called me then. My body blew like a gust
of snow out of the cabin.

This hour knows me only as the ghost of man,
the little fog that starts in the bloodstream
and melts beneath the grass. Under lightly-
swaying boughs of fir, the stars are cried
singly into an air of blackest stone.
Suddenly, all the pregnant does on the island
bear the hearts of their fawns down to the ocean,
hearts wrapped in ribs soft as tissue-paper.
The does' hooves fall like sunlight on soot. Somewhere
girls are turning sixteen with the same calm step,
their pale fingers unwrapping the softness from gifts,
as moonlight caresses the skin of their necks.
I listen and head for the tide lapping its rough
tongue on the salted rocks. Behind me, the cabin-light
vanishes like the flash of a blackbird's closing wing.
When I reach the source of the unseen slaking,
and can go no further, my own blood presses hard
against the night, inner-warmth I can't return to,
the well-banked fires of my suspended life.

Time passes without touching me; air fills my lungs
the way rain fills a rowboat cut adrift from its dock.
Now, the last night-ferry looms around the point,
its mass gliding closer, half-lit, a great hive
of dead and honeyed combs. Slowly, the world returns,
an engine of pulses strong as mine, another island
of cabined dreamers loosed beneath the stars, except
this cousin for my solitude who leans against the rail.
At least, I thought I saw a figure there
about to turn himself toward his life and friends.
I hope I did. I hope he smiled my smile
as he stepped back from the floating glass,
content to live as flesh in time again.

There are fires on this coast that need salt to burn.
The wind shovels it on, year by year.
Tall fires that blaze from each bare rock
like pagan sacrifices. Something Celtic,
the salt a virgin's powdered bones.

Look how the world drifts by them, tanning
on the crowded decks. It believes in a sweet
Christian sunlight lowered like sacramental wine.
It doesn't warm itself with rugged solitudes,
fires born of the sea. It loves the virginal moon
and wants her safe, sleeping on cold, blue sheets
beneath the stars.

But I know the flesh of midnight burns. Look.
There are fires on this coast that keep their own
ash prisoner. There are those who sacrifice
their being to the flames, and that sad phoenix
will never rise. We love too much our scorched
and scorching years. The moon still wears her darkness,
her deep and painful burns. No one escapes this life.
Even the flighted weep salt with their tears.

Not even the kingfisher's cold blue absorption
in its prey
contains such a love of still shadow;
the flames lay us down so gently
on the fir-cones and needles
it's as though they remember the bones
we grew from, the voices that sang
in another darkness -
is this why we can't move close enough,
why the flickering light becomes a body
we long to embrace?

The firs huddle in: funneled by
their sweetness, we gaze
in sympathy at the moon, whose sad
tolling of the salt-tide echoes
far from our heated blood;
though the stars have bowed
their bright tiara to us,
respectful of that grace
eternity grants to silence.

And for long stretches
we do not speak, lost in the driftwood's
crackling a capella
that recounts to us every heartbeat
of the orcas cruising in the Gulf,
every breath drawn on the sunlit
side of the world.

We are prey, and our still shadows
whet the instincts of a diving death,
but we have been gifted
this warmth, for the blood
we add to it, that will burn again,
so the next listeners will hear
as we do
the inquisitive, shy approach
of deer through the soft salal.

In medieval
times the ritual
evisceration
of the hart
involved 36
separate steps
each an intricate
culturally-fixed
part of the death.
36. Somehow just
that sum
no more no less.
Last year
at the edge
of the Pacific ocean
the carcass
of a young deer
afloat on the surf
beat against the rocks
again and again
its gold hide softened
into kelp. I counted
more than 36
times
the slow blue lift
and sudden shock
of the body fall-
ing in the intricate
rituals of the setting
sun. My eyes
closed my eyes
closed
their whetted edge
sure and loving
on my throat.

Greeting The New Year In Vancouver

Four a.m. I step outside
and the tinsel grass crunches:
a few feet away
on the neighbours' huge Victorian house
icicles rare as mammoths' tusks
glint in the year's first starlight;
someone's still awake, a fire
veins the beast's chilled gaze;
he stirs, snorts great grey breaths
in the pre-dawn air, shakes
a little snow from his burning hide
but refuses to lumber off.

Hunger without direction defines the hour.
I can't sleep for dreaming. The new earth,
palely lit by past millennia,
retracts its ladders; no one walks here.
Poseidon, blue-lipped in the fishpond,
lusts sadly for his blue Aegean,
while the Japanese carp, stiff as coins,
float wishless in the ice:
once more I am resolved
to fresh divinities, brighter schools.

Four a.m.
The planet turns slowly
like a man looking back
at his footsteps in the snow.

My neighbours, myself:
stillborn dreams
in the heart of a slumbering beast
who awaits with icy calm
the red matrix stride of the sun.

It is too early in the season for love.
The blackberries in the faces of lonely
women staring through the rain-streaked
windows of coffee-shops have not yet ripened
with promise. Men bury their hands in their
pockets as though afraid a roaming gypsy
will read their palms and deem them empty.
A mile away, obscured by mist, someone speaks
listlessly in Spanish on the ship-to-shore.
Mi corazon. Si, si, in a west coast storm,
it's rarely just the waves that break.

I pluck the guitar-strings of rain
with my eyes while waiting for a friend.
She is late, and perhaps won't come at all.
I look a Spanish song into the horizon,
striking all the melancholy chords.
An hour passes, and the rain falls harder,
pulls the early blossoms from the apple trees;
they fill the air like lapped milk off a cat's
rough tongue. I'm a little in love with the woman
who never turns the corner with my name on her lips.
And the rain falls even harder, each drop now fat
and dark as a stevedore's greased thumb. The sailor
returns to the gentle rhythms of his duty.

Li-Na, if I sit here all day like a letter opened
far too late to make a difference, who will tell
the rain I've left the subtle borders of its country?
I can't wait much longer. Women with sad Castillan eyes
implore me to strum the music of the mended heart
and swell the flavour of their summer gaze: instead,
I'm going home, shawled in a poncho of all the tears
the earth has swallowed in our century.

To reach the ocean
we must cross the surface of the sun
shielding our eyes
like the nineteenth century
before a van gogh canvas,
we must part the rays, step
by step refract the light:
such a distance to the horizon
and it keeps curving away.

Our shadows cannot fall;
they're bottled ink inside us.
To one side, the hundred baking
ovens of a stalled coal train;
to the other, tomorrow.
But we don't seek that rising.
We only want the sad blue
tremble of home.

Such a long journey
even though
in this light
we soon become light

and the seagulls float behind us like our bones.

On the west coast of the country it's three a.m.
The salmon fishers of the Gulf of Georgia are hauling in
their nets thick with phosphorous. "Fire-in-the-Water"
they sigh, knowing the brilliance warns away the fish.
I used to dredge that old sunlight from the ocean myself,
hand over hand pull the warmth of gone years to my chest.
Sixty fathoms deep, and deeper, the bullion of yesterday.
And it isn't always wanted, I tell myself, that treasure,
no, sometimes the past when it shines most beautifully
must be packed with ice and sold for a pittance,
so the sparks of our hands can flicker wan light
in the ash of the emberless sea.

SECTION THREE

"I have had a great deal of pleasant time
with Rice lately, and am getting initiated
into a little band--they call drinking deep
dying scarlet."

Keats to his brothers, January, 1818

John Keats and his circle in their cups
died scarlet. And the poet's life
to its dregs did the same, his linen
bedsheets and nightshirt finely spotted.
The world loves him for drinking so deep
from the few years he had, for those pretty
tipples he took from his days' good wine;
the world honours blood flushed in a pale
brow that bends above blank pages in candle-
flicker, giving joy, believing. Vitality
is beautiful even coughed on a lace cuff,
o little red cosmos, little red heaven,
that last faint breath exhaled before dust
and the cold grave smothered his youth.

I don't know anything certain about the dead
except they're gone, young Keats and his brothers,
the two women named Fanny he loved, his friends,
the publishers who respected his art, the guardian
who didn't, Shelley with a drowned volume in his
shirt-pocket under Italian stars, gone. A century
of letter-writing, gossip, tuberculosis and poems.
And I don't know where the spirit of any poet goes
if it doesn't die scarlet wherever it can, Keats's
joy in October sunsets over the Adams River, full in
the salmon's scales as they scrabble to spawn before
the air eats to nothing their lace-threaded bones,
Keats's fear in the eyes of the ring-necked pheasant
shot out of its heart in the blue skies of my marshland
home, the long script of its bright death trailing
off into the ditches and rushes. I have heard the music
of his lines gasped from a thousand slack jaws
while the world stood crowded on the riverbanks,
amazed; my hands have touched the spots of his truth
on a thousand downed wings still quivering in frost.
In my wrists live the ghosts of all the words
ever written in his, and his Queen's, English;
they gather in my pulses, drinking life, dying scarlet,
unrestrained in their gaiety and rowdiness, dying
like the salmon and the pheasant and the flushed
eves of fall, dying as a poet dies, face turned
towards what's left of his life, the spatter

of his joy's heaven on his clothes,
the light going out on his page forever, the wax
of the last candle on his nightstand melted down,
as he lies grieving for every second he's lost
of the sun: I don't expect to know the vivid dawn
that finally dissolved the gay circle of Keats,
but if I'm blessed to die scarlet on my native ground,
let the wind dig a grave for my pallid song.

A Small Essay in Honour of the Past

...55

I want to see my vague notions float
like the down of the thistle before
the breeze, and not to have them entangled
in the briars and thorns of controversy.

William Hazlitt

For just one night, to be William Hazlitt
going a journey at the end of the eighteenth century,
deliciously alone on the road to some walled and turretted
town with a Hog's Head Inn and amber lamplight puddling the
gloom. To anticipate steaming viands and whole goblets of tea
and a long repose with a letter carried with me from London.
To recite
as I stroll a few favourite lines by my good friend,
Coleridge,
something about green upland swells and bleating flocks. To
own
my mind in a solitude so pure only a bottle of sherry and
a cold chicken could bring me back to the physical world.
Is it too much to want this, for just one night, at the end
of the twentieth century? A few quiet hours on a long, narrow
road lit by stars? A groom whispering tender praise to my
fatigue
as he leads it to the stable? The Irish setter of a fire
curled
at my feet, growling at my one foe, worry, in his sleep?
Somewhere the ghost of Hazlitt approaches an old village
at nightfall, delighting in dreams of onion-smothered rabbit.
He refuses to believe his lips are cold and that the Host
of the Hog's Head will not take his useless coins. I love
his obstinance in the face of death. O for just one night,
to be the warm body supping pleasure in his wake.

Depression

for Norm Sacuta

The moon drops a sack of crushed grapes
from my shoulders. Another muggy night
and this is all I have for company,
musk at my pantlegs like a dog.
It's been a week of thunderstorms,
that frayed black rope in the sky
I dread to see the end of, the flashes
of photo-hounds at the hanging. Now
the moon is a letter on a black-oak desk
I haven't started to someone I love.
I'm a happy man, most days, but white
limbs that vint a sweet wine from
the body's cast can leave a bitter
aftertaste. That is, a memory of love
can make us harsh on what we have.
Hear that? The hour brings the rope.
The musk puts its paws against my chest.
There's nothing for it, life IS Russian.
Tell Gogol my shoulders drag his overcoat.

Having Lunch In A Tea-Room Full Of Elderly Women

...57

The clink of spoons in china cups signals
the judiciary of the ampersand:
& so and so's daughter has a new job
& my grandson's marriage is troubled
& why shouldn't she spend a little of the money
now she's on her own?
& I don't know why the government insists on
& have you read that book, seen that show?
& the cheesecake's wonderful, but terribly rich
& when the moon lies on her back, the salmon
will surely run
& who ever mourns the forgotten miles
on all the tires in all the junkyards of the world?
& death is simply the moment when
the wind shears like sheep all the dandelions
drowsing in the midmorning sun.

I feel I should rise and approach the bench
I feel I should plead for leniency;
there are blades of grass in my skin
that ghosts have never used to whistle
their loved ones home.

When I leave
I push back my chair so softly
only the spoons in their fragile cups
sing out a silver mercy.

Sad, and Turning Pages in the OED

1607 Shak Coriolanus IV i 30
"I go alone Like to a lonely Dragon"

No one was lonely before Shakespeare.
The feeling did not fall from tongue
to lip to air. Men stood in nights so
black they couldn't see their hands
and wept, saying nothing to the moon.
Women pushed suckling mouths from their
breasts, and gasped in mute despair. Such
a small key, such a sharp click in the
soft red lock. One mind made the turning,
and millions cried "Oh Christ, I'm lonely!"
One pen scratched the parchment, one hand
held the pen, one heart moved the hand:
"lonely" whispered in the silence, falling
from tongue to lip to air, a kiss for
lost hands, a kiss for sore breasts.

Shakespeare's been dead 400 years,
and we're lonely,
the moon knows the weight of our breath,
and we're lonely,
a million mouths form hunger
in the cradle,
and what else is our genius,
but this lust to speak full life,
the dream on the lip, the tremble?

Je Veux's Just Another Phrase ...59
for "Something that I'd Choose"

I want to write the longest line of poetry in our language
but I can't. I want to type Poe's "To Helen" into the automatic teller and receive five thousand dollars in small
American bills while the line behind me grows longer than
the line of poetry I want to make the longest in our language
but can't. Sometimes I wish there were a "no-items" lane
at the grocery store so I could just walk past the cashiers
and say "hello" to their "hi," and "fine" to their "how are you?"
Do you have any idea how sad I am when the postman comes
and there's no letter for me, oh oh oh Mr. Postman, do you?
On days like this I wish a concert pianist would sit down
at the baby grand of my shadow and play all my mournful music,
the smudged, blurred notes of my past. I could promise him
or her an audience of cumulous posing as mink stoles on wealthy
dowager patrons, or perhaps a bag of macaroons from the store
if I could make my way past the line at the express checkout
which is longer than the longest line of poetry in our language
but I can't. I don't know what a fugue is, but I suspect
my life is currently experiencing one. There are dobermans
chained to all the gateposts of my childhood; I wish I could
say to them, "Fellas, I love those Nicean barks of yours,"
but I can't. Smile more often at strangers, my mother writes
in the meticulous and Elizabethanly black penmanship
for which she received excellent marks at Alexander Muir
Elementary School in downtown Toronto, Ontario, circa 1934.
If I were unhappy at the end of a century with fewer lines
and had my mother's beautiful flower-weighted hand, I'd write
the longest line of poetry in our lovely, lovely language,
I would
oh yes
I would.

Tall lilacs and long driveways. The moon
touches its chauffeur's gloves to every car-handle,
but no one wants to go for a drive. They are moored
in mahogany harbours, their bodies are the bone china
registered for the wedding of good taste and silence.
I am unshaven and uncouth as John Garfield before
the prettiest of the pretty Lane sisters, and I feel
I should have arrived to poison the Dean's daughter
against him and his world. I haven't, alas. I'm only
passing through until the next train ropes its black length
around my neck and hauls me out. But there are days, yes,
there are days when I could whisper social-democratic thoughts
into the seashell ears of debutantes, and smudge their tennis
whites with blue-collar caresses. Oh yes, and I could take the
Dean's cheque to get out of town, and leave ten pillows of
tears in my wake. You don't know what complacency does to the
blood
of a man whose only books are paperbacks and used. Shove over
Moon, there's a good chap, I'm driving to the Sunrise Pub;
you're welcome to join me, and the scent of the lilacs,
on the condition that you bring your pale daughters.

Searching for a good translation of a woman's heart,
the joy and pain that live across the sea, beneath
the ground, I find my body swaying to the only Russian
phrase I ever understood in the marrow not the mind;
"Shy boo! Shy boo!", the mufflered Moscow crowd shouted
through my parents' tiny black and white as the point-
men made their passes back and forth. "Shoot the puck!
Shoot the puck!" And all their muscles strained to hear
the heavy slap of wood on ice, as all my muscles feared
the flashing light behind our net. The only phrase, but
in it throbbed the longing of a common passion.

Now the typing script of forward passes lies on a page
long turned; I am not the boy who wears a leaf upon his
chest and chews his nails over finite games of skill
and chance; the crowd is no subsided cheer, but thousands
leaving for their lives, the heartbeats falling from
the branches, the moon out wandering in her muddied
wedding dress, crying the bloodsoaked phrases
of the only language pure enough to translate
our spirits into grass, the grass we pray
our children learn their swaying from.

Speculation On Those
Who Have Had Affairs With Famous Poets

The students John Berryman slept with
have graduated into the last third of their lives
now and no longer carry the musk of the poet
to their beds, not even after wine and laughter
or moody evenings alone with the Dream Songs.
The body, after all, is finally just a word
we can't capture in metre; it stops singing
when the blood that gives it meaning stills.

And the mistresses of Earle Birney have blown
their white youth off like dandelion seed
and retire to their shared or solitary sleep
with perhaps a fondness for his memory
but no limb remembering his metrical weight;
there is only a restless phantom of it
in his many lines, the longing of chalk
for the board, the long ride of salt
to the shore. The page under a dead poet's
song is always a little like a bleached sky
of jackdaws on the day of Fame's funeral;
the fire rages, but it can't spread
unless it seeks to burn the greener wood.

The spark in the grain is our philandering tongue.
No one is physical enough in memory to warm a bone.
We all walk out of those rooms where we loved most,
leaving the volume of the moonlight turned down
just a notch, our last trail of footprints from
the shower gone, and maybe a woman falling asleep
over a Collected or the latest quarterly, each
of her pale hands holding the brown monarch
of an age-spot so tenderly that it might be
the soul of someone flown, whom she never knew,
except as a dalliance of song
on its lonely flight to posterity.

I would like to hear from you more often,
at least twice a day, like in the nineteenth century,
when both the dawn & the twilight mailed
their mysteries in the guise of words,
every day that first gift of the sun & stars
sprinkled on each envelope
to massage my empty hands, ah like a tray
of butter, a saucer of milk, slipped
into my life by someone sensitive to my need;
& I would like to open every letter slowly
with a beautiful paperknife that was my father's
& his father's before,
& I would like to stay late in bed
in my silk pyjamas & handlebar moustache,
nibbling a piece of toast, sipping a cup of tea,
reading every word with care, every graceful stroke
of the calligraphy you learned from the Mesdemoiselles
of your foreign schools,
& I would like to dream of the moistened nib
of your fabulous peacock-quill pen
sliding across the creamy pastel paper
that was your mother's & her mother's before
that feels every bit as soft as
I remember your skin, so far away,
& when I come home in the evening, tired,
carrying a hundred years without you on my eyes,
when I leave the streetlamps & the fog behind,
the clop of muscled horses on the empty cobblestone,
I would like to find, on the mahogany table
in the hall, at the foot of the winding stairs,
as I sink slowly in the plush damask
of my high & lonely station,
a nest of your pale letters
glimmering in the first electric light,
the blood-red wax that seals each one
like a beauty-mark I have known forever
on a cheek I have missed as long:
beautiful woman, veiled & chaperoned,
the moss is settling, the ivy changing colour,
come home, come home...

The lilacs have bloomed and you go out to pick them
holding the scissors like a small divining rod.
Your bare feet leave soft impressions in the wet grass
and the cherry tree fills them with blossom.
All day I have been reading Chekhov's stories
and lingering over his paragraphs on love. How sad
his characters are, always meeting too late, then
parting forever before the train leaves the station.
Tears, snowflakes in gaslight, a lowered lorgnette.
And a loveless marriage in the town of S--. I'm sure
there's a story about lilacs I haven't found, and a
beautiful woman cutting perfume from the sky. I'm sure
I can find faded blossoms where her passage graced
the earth. But why should I look? You are standing
in the immaculate motes of an April twilight, bunches
of lilac blooming from the pale vases of your arms,
and when I lay my book down and walk out to you,
all my bones begin to tremble, divining a straight path
through the musk of evening's beauty and your own,
twin pools my body sinks into beneath a shy, new moon.

One Year Later ...65

A black fly the exact length of your phone number
settles on the back of my hand. I wasn't thinking of you.
Now the summer smears blackberry juice on my skin
and the smell is sweet. Now the little train of longing
pulls forward; the old dials tremble in my fingertips.
I will not think of you. My voice will never again leave
its message after your soft explanation of absence.
The fly is seven dark raindrops that drench my whole body.
The fly is seven dips of a quill in John Donne's midnight.
The fly is the scar your mascara left when you cried.
And the fly, like my longing, must rise again to its life.

One Morning, Early

The last spiderweb I broke
joined the fishnet fence around
my father's vegetable garden to
a ripening pear on the neighbours'
loaded tree. Six feet it spanned
at a sharp enough angle to need
twelve feet of web. But the central
design was small, and I walked through
the thin strand on the garden side
too late to catch myself. I wasn't
going anywhere important enough to
break a spider's heart. That day
I walked for the pure sake of feeling
August on my skin. Then I crossed
the line, a marathon-tape for dragonflies,
and watched it scythe to a gentle stop
in the wet grass full of fallen pears.
And I noticed the other strand.
What does a spider know about time, to
trust its art to something doomed?
Or would the craft have been undone
under moonlight at a tremble from
the branch we cannot feel? If so,
I had not been bargained for, by
August or the world I'd ruined.
If not, I had fallen, and perhaps
am falling still. September, let me walk
with care through your gold, decaying rooms.
I am holding fast to the swollen light.
The spider trusts its art to something doomed.

The axe-blade falls and splits
the cedar block. At the exact
second the wood opens, I hear
the cry of Canada geese rising
from the marsh, as though I'd
set their voices free, as though
their voices split the block.
The vibration in my arm is partly
echo, partly flight. Who am I
to stand between the seasons?
Over my shoulder, three leaves
on the maple tree decide to blush
a deeper red. And farther, higher,
smoke from a leaf-fire wraps around
a blue pillar of sky. I can't see
the geese, but their cry is louder.
Winter owes us nothing but its cold.
I throw the split block on the pile,
drop the axe. And stand, staring.
It's always this way:
the cry of geese is the smoke,
and our silence the fire.

The cherries ripen around their pits. The sky
reddens around the sun. My body darkens around
my bones as I stand in the orchard grass and age.
It is all the same, the season and the day and what
the spirit grows toward and loves. I can't remember
if I'm nine or seventeen or thirty-one, but something
in my eye is pit and sun and bone, and the flesh
that ripens around it ripens the rhythm on my tongue.
Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home, your house
is on fire and your children all alone.
The world is a cry in red that calls
the smallest life to care. We cry and care
in the one seared voice, to crack the pit
and the sun and the bone. When spirit loves
its flesh and does not flinch from the burn,
the black ash yields the ripening word.

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